

WATERSHED COALITION POWER IN APPALACHIA – KEEPERS OF THE LAND AND WATER

Kelley N. Sponaugle, USDA/NRCS, 465 Ragland Road, Beckley, WV 25801

The land and water resources of many Appalachian watersheds have been severely impacted by land use, floodplain encroachment and lack of infrastructure. In recent years grassroot coalitions have organized to address local issues of concern. Many of these organizations start as an “anti” group. Opposing some action within the community. Harnessing and utilizing this grassroots energy in positive ways can provide for lasting comprehensive reclamation of watersheds.

Appalachia has a long history of people in conflict with nature resources. The extraction industries historically have owned most of the land. In many mining town the individual ownership of land was non-existent. In the mid-twentieth century most companies sold the company homes with small lots. Today many watersheds are still dominantly owned by large corporations with only a very small percent owned by individuals. The culture was one in which people were controlled by the company. Consequently strong local grassroots leadership did not develop.

These communities were conditioned to except lower standards of the quality of life and nature resources. Mine disasters, floods and poor recreation was accepted as a way of life. Today communities are expecting more, people are organizing in community and watershed coalitions to express concerns and provide leadership for changing and improving their communities. Many of these groups are interested in improving the quality of their nature resources.

The most effective method of managing nature resources is on a watershed basis. This was demonstrated in projects such as the Coon Creek watershed in Wisconsin in the 1930's and has been utilized for countless projects. Over the past decade the development of local grassroots watershed groups has brought new focus and empowerment for action to improved resource management. There is success stories in every state and community of people coming together in organized efforts to work with both private and government organizations to impact concerns.

We all know this process works. What do we do to make them work to improve the quality of life, and resources in communities that have been severely damaged by past mining? That is our challenge as agencies charged with reclamation responsibilities.

Pennsylvania has used this process very effectively in addressing acid mine drainage (AMD) and other water quality issues. In West Virginia, Pat and I are working to create the inter-agency commitments to make this process work. This statement is perhaps worn-out “When we partner we can do more”, however it is as true today as it was the first time it was said.

By utilizing the roles, talents, expertise of various organizations and agencies more can be accomplished with greater holistic benefits. We are currently working on three watersheds. I will discuss who is involved in these watersheds and what are the roles. First an overview of each watershed.

Deckers Creek is located in northern West Virginia. It is an old PL-566 project that has been damaged by excessive sediment in several structures. Various AMD discharges are having severe impact on the water quality. NRCS and WVAML have developed a plan to utilize both AML and PL-566 funds for project installation. Funding for this plan is a combination of NRCS PL-566 funds, WVAML, AMD set-aside funds, (ACSI) Appalachian Clean Streams Initiative and local funds including watershed maintenance funds from the Conservation District. Specific

projects will be funded by each agency. Cost sharing is based on the overall plan and is not by individual practice.

Paint Creek is in south central West Virginia. This watershed has a large acreage of abandon minelands that are contributing to a heavy sediment load and several sources of AMD are restricting fisheries. NRCS has provided an assessment of the minelands in the watershed to AML for developing a watershed plan. In Paint Creek, a wide range of funding will be used to complete fisheries projects, funding has been provided by CVI, WVCA, WVDNR, ACSI, OSM, WVDEP with technical assistance from NRCS and contracting provided by the local conservation district. Reclamation will be completed by a combination of AML and AMD set-aside and ACSI. NRCS utilized RAMP funds to complete the watershed assessment. CVI has provided funding and organizational support to the group.

Pigeon Creek is located in southern West Virginia, Hatfield and McCoy country, along the Kentucky border. Here NRCS working with AML and others and a strong local organization has developed a strategic plan for improvement in the watershed. Currently mine mitigation funds from a local coal company are being used for in-stream fisheries improvements. NRCS has provided technical assistance to complete a watershed assessment and strategic plan. The local watershed coalition has a vista worker provided by an OSM grant. Reclamation projects in the watershed are being funded by RAMP, AML, AMD set-aside programs and ACSI. This watershed group has completed various clean-ups and is currently developing a community park. CVI is providing organizational support to the group.

The common roles within these projects are: 1) Each project has a strong local watershed organization that is committed to improving their resources. They know the local needs and impacts of the existing situation. They also have a vision of what they want, it's often vague and needs defining. Many of these organizations start as "anti" something with conflicting interest and ideas. In many cases, their energy needs focusing and direction. They have tremendous political power for funding when they have well documented and planned projects.

They also bring local ownership to projects. This ownership assures that projects are maintained and have lasting benefits. We all know that many of our reclamation projects have had benefits limited because of misuse from recreation vehicles, etc. The principle is simple: "If it belongs to the government no one cares. If it belongs to the community they care."

These local organizations lack ability to assess, analyze, plan, design, and construct projects.

2) The local conservation district is a critical player. The CD's have the ability to manage funds in a legal, accountable, statutory system. They have co-operative agreements with most nature resource management agencies. Through their ability to handle funds and work with a wide range of agencies they can facilitate the planning and implementation of projects on the local level. The unique delivery system of CD's can supports WS organizations by combining private, state and federal resources for local projects.

State AML agencies are the leaders in reclamation expertise and funding. AMD issues are extremely complex and expensive to treat. Your treatment expertise and funding source is the major resource available. Applying these resources to local watersheds holistically will improve water quality, stream health and peoples lives.

What can NRCS do? One of our strongest talents is working with local groups to assess and analyze resource information and develop plans. We have a long history of success in developing local leadership and plans to carryout projects. In addition to these resources, NRCS has possibilities of funding through various sources such as PL-566, RAMP and special projects.

In West Virginia we have another key player in the Canaan Valley Institute. They are an organization primarily concerned with developing local grassroots leadership in communities and watersheds along with WVDEP stream partners.

There is a host of other agencies and organizations that can contribute services, funds and resources. OSM is a major player with AML agencies. EPA, COE, TVA and others have funds and programs that can be in-cooperated. Corporations and private grant organizations can play major roles.

It sounds so simple, developing leadership, assessing resources, planning actions, funding, designing and installing projects. Each of these activities can be provided by someone who does it best.

Our challenge as leaders within these agencies is to utilize these resources for maximum impacts. The most bang for the buck.